

You're Not from Around Here, Are You?

By IKE SKELTON and JIM COOPER

Know thy enemy. That adage has been repeated since armies first clashed on the field of battle. Understanding enemy intentions, tactics, and vulnerabilities is an essential part of warfare. But it is also necessary to know your friends. Making enemies is easy, but it is harder to make friends. The wrong approach to allied or occupied countries can quickly create enemies.

The United States has not been an occupying power since immediately after World War II. In Korea and Vietnam, where the goal was fighting and leaving, sensitivity to local culture was important, although it was not a long-term concern. In Iraq, however, a cultural divide brought

to the fore issues that three generations of soldiers have considered only peripherally.

Operating in a foreign land can be a minefield. Few members of the Armed Forces will be familiar with cultural traditions of the countries in which they operate. Yet violation of local norms and beliefs can turn a welcoming population into a hostile mob.

Iraqis arrested by U.S. troops have had their heads forced to the ground, a position forbidden by Islam except during prayers. This action offends detainees as well as bystanders. In Bosnia, American soldiers angered Serbs by greeting them

with the two-fingered peace sign, a gesture commonly used by their Croat enemies. And the circled-finger "A-OK" signal was a gross insult to Somalis. The military has enough to worry about without alienating the local population.

Afghanistan and Iraq

Though it may be premature to draw definitive lessons from Afghanistan or Iraq, it is clear that the Armed Forces lack sophisticated knowledge of foreign countries. That does not dishonor their performance; cultural awareness is not a mission-essential task—but it should be.

Winning a conflict means more than subduing an enemy. While the U.S. military ran into trouble in the past, it was not because it lacked combat skills, personal courage, or the necessary resources. As operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have demonstrated, the process of restructuring the political order, economy, and social well-being of an entire country is as critical as defeating organized resistance. But it is cultural awareness that helps determine whether a host population supports long-term American military presence—and may determine the outcome of the mission.

It is uncertain whether the majority of the Iraqi people will support the multinational efforts, which many see as responsible for the unrest. Rebuilding Iraq may hinge on drawing appropriate inferences from ethnic and religious aspects of its culture—including tribal dynamics—and then properly responding to them. Commanders in Iraq have stressed the importance of being aware of these elements of the security landscape.

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Flight deck fire training aboard *USS John C. Stennis*.



U.S. Navy (Mark J. Rebilas)

The House Armed Services Committee held a hearing in late 2003 to examine the lessons of Iraqi Freedom at which Major General Robert Scales, Jr., USA (Ret.), highlighted the requirement for cultural awareness among both civilian and military personnel. His testimony emphasized that had American planners better understood Iraqi culture, efforts to win the peace would have been more sound. Senior officials and commanders might have reached a different conclusion on the willingness of Iraqis to welcome the U.S. military for an extended period of reconstruction.

Events during Uphold Democracy further emphasized cultural differences:

The Army in general had little appreciation of Haitian history and culture. Few planners knew anything about Haiti other than its basic geography. In a combat operation, where overwhelming firepower achieves objectives, sensitivity for the local population's culture and traditions clearly is not a top priority. In a peace operation such as Uphold Democracy, however, knowledge of how a people think and act, and how they might react to military intervention, arguably becomes paramount. The U.S. military culture in general focuses on training warriors to use fire and maneuver and tends to resist the notion of culture awareness.¹

The need for cultural awareness is not unique to the American military. Russian soldiers in Chechnya made cultural blunders in dealing

with local civilians who, once insulted or mistreated, either supported active resistance fighters or joined them. Moreover, Russian leaders realized that they had underestimated the influence of religion in the region.

Cultural Awareness

Understanding the culture and social factors peculiar to the countries in which Americans are most likely to be deployed will make the environment work to U.S. advantage. On the lowest level, awareness means knowing enough about local culture to permit military personnel to operate effectively. Along with linguistic capability, cultural awareness can highlight political, social, and other characteristics of the operational area. It can explain why local people may see things differently from Americans. It can enable troops on the ground to understand how their attitudes and actions directly influence mission outcome.

The Armed Forces often operate as part of coalitions and alliances. Nations cannot work together without recognizing their cultural differences—where the other guy is coming from. That awareness becomes even more important over time. It is not a touchy-feely or nice-to-have social grace; it is basic intelligence on attitudes and potential actions of host nations and coalition partners. Only such insights can enable the military to understand other cultures.



U.S. Army (Gul A. Alisan)

Soldiers departing for Afghanistan.

The 1940 Marine Corps manual on insurgency noted that:

*The motive in small wars is not material destruction. It is usually a project dealing with social, economic, and political development of the people. It is of primary importance that the fullest benefit be derived from the psychological aspects of the situation. That implies a serious study of the people, their racial, political, religious, and mental development. By analysis and study the reasons for the existing emergency may be deduced; the most practical method of solving the problem is to understand the possible approaches thereto and the repercussion to be expected from any actions which may be contemplated. By this study and ability to apply correct psychological doctrine, many pitfalls may be avoided and the success of the undertaking assured.*²

Stability operations and postconflict reconstruction are among the major challenges facing the military in the post-Cold War world. This was

clear even before Afghanistan and Iraq—two battlefronts in the global war on terrorism.

The Army and Marine Corps have a history of conducting such operations under the

rubric of *low intensity conflict* and *military operations other than war*. Operations in the Philippines from 1899 to 1903 and in Haiti from 1994 to 1995 also offer examples of partial success in such efforts. Other than foreign area officers, defense attachés, and Special Forces, there is insufficient cultural awareness and linguistic skill among commissioned and noncommissioned officers.

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A combat brigade would not be deployed into hostile territory without maps. The beliefs of a culture are as critical as terrain features. The unit should have those coordinates as well.

Defining the Need

Predeployment preparations must include cultural awareness training. Just as personnel are trained in specific tactics, they should be provided an understanding of the environment where they will operate. The ability of deployed personnel to draw inferences from experience or study could contribute decisively to the national strategy.

General Scales describes the operational environment and importance of cultural awareness:

*The image of sergeants and captains acting alone in the Afghanistan wilderness and the sands of Iraq, innovating on the fly with instruments of strategic killing power, reaffirms the truth that today's leaders must acquire the skills and wisdom to lead indirectly at a much lower level. Today's tactical leaders must be able to act alone in ambiguous and uncertain circumstances, lead soldiers they cannot touch, think so as to anticipate the enemy's actions—they must be tactically proactive rather than reactive.*³

The need for cultural awareness extends beyond the foxhole. Senior officers must create an appropriate command climate. Civilian officials need to be culturally aware in developing policy and strategy. They must know that imposing American values on unwilling people in a foreign country may have undesired strategic and operational consequences. Deployed personnel must have sufficient awareness in theaters where ambiguous and contradictory situations are the norm. And because of the reliance on the Reserve components, they must have similar training.

At a minimum, training on cultural awareness should occur on two levels. The first would be focused on planners. As an interim measure, programs for flag and field grade officers would be appropriate, along with greater emphasis on cultural awareness in curricula at both the staff and war college levels. As soon as practical, that training should be extended to all officers.

One report on the experiences of general officers who served in Bosnia, Somalia, and Haiti noted the need for additional training.

*Greater emphasis must be placed on geopolitical and cultural training for the Army's officer corps. Such training must begin at the officer basic course and continue at all levels of professional military education. Officers at all grades will benefit from such training because of the likelihood that they will be involved in peace operations on multiple occasions throughout their careers.*⁴

Marines landing in amphibious exercise.



U.S. Navy (Terry M. Matlock)

Training should be comprehensive and offered to both the active and Reserve components. The ideal program would reward continued learning and require that officers get an early start on becoming indirect leaders. Unit leaders would mentor their performance while undergoing instruction. Both the classroom and distance learning would stretch across career assignments. The curriculum would be historically based and thoroughly joint.

The second tier involves language and area studies. Commissioned and noncommissioned leaders must possess some language skills and understanding of nations to which they are deployed. This sort of training results in street sense—knowing how to gather intelligence from local people. That can only happen with cultural awareness. It is the level on which simple linguistic skills are essential: *Halt, lay down your weapon.* But it is better to warn of the likely consequences of such interactions with locals.

Compared to education, training involves imparting specific skills. It can be prepackaged and offered throughout a career. It is part of the daily military routine. As one officer described his experience in Bosnia:

Specialists are assigned to ensure the commanders are politically astute, historically aware, and culturally sensitized. Unfortunately, this information has

no real conduit down to company and platoon levels, and perhaps most important, to the individual soldier. In most organizations of the conventional infantry force, there is no foreign area officer or civil affairs officer who specializes in these matters to fill the gap. Although it is vital for senior leaders to be well informed in these facets of operations, it is often the company commander, platoon leader, or squad leader who finds himself . . . dealing with the civilian populace day by day.⁵

A Matter of Timing

Cultural awareness must be taught on the primary level. And knowing your enemy should be accompanied by knowing your friends. Moreover, educational and training programs should focus on those regions likely to pose threats to national security and cultures vital to long-term strategic relationships.

Mandating cultural awareness training is easier than implementing it. First, identifying which cultures to study and what level of proficiency to attain is demanding. There is no one-size-fits-all answer to cultural awareness. Nonspecific theories on cultural contexts can be detrimental, and generalizing cultural characteristics can be deceptive.

Americans are often direct in their conversations, expecting the truth with no hint of deception. At the

Crew chiefs performing final checks on F-15.



U.S. Air Force (Verlin Levi Collins)

same time, Americans also tend to be uncomfortable with silent moments. People in some other countries, though, may prefer not to be direct and may shift their eyes away from the American...a person who is reluctant to maintain eye contact is called shifty-eyed and arouses suspicion. But in some countries an attempt to maintain eye contact may be perceived as a sign of aggression. Accordingly, in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and other Asian countries, maintaining eye contact is not an acceptable behavior. On the other hand, in Saudi Arabia, eye contact and gestures of openness are important and could facilitate communications.⁶

Predeployment training focuses on the current military situation for all the obvious reasons. But cultural awareness training must be accomplished on a regular basis and well in advance. Thus that knowledge must already be in place before it is time to go.

The national security strategy envisions a more assertively expeditionary military. Over the last two decades, extended coalition operations have become the norm. This requires operational planning that recognizes the importance of cultural awareness. If implemented, integrated training to develop such awareness will have lasting, positive effects for plans, actionable intelligence, and the credibility of U.S. objectives. Experience

teaches that cultural awareness is a force multiplier. It is the time to be serious about enhancing our knowledge of today's world. The Armed Forces are busier than ever before, but they are not too busy to be culturally aware. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Walter B. Kretchik, Robert F. Baumann, John T. Fishel, *Invasion, Intervention, Intervasion: A Concise History of the U.S. Army Operation Uphold Democracy* (Fort Leavenworth, Kan.: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1998), p. 188.

² U.S. Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1940), p. 18.

³ Major General Robert H. Scales, Jr., USA (Ret.), letter to the Honorable Ike Skelton, June 12, 2003.

⁴ U.S. Institute for Peace, *Alternative National Military Strategies for the United States* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2000), p. 6.

⁵ Joel B. Krauss, "Cultural Awareness in Stability and Support Operations," *Infantry*, vol. 89, no. 1 (January/April 1999), p. 15.

⁶ Gary Bonvillian and William A. Nowlin, "Cultural Awareness: An Essential Element of Doing Business Abroad," *Business Horizons*, vol. 37, no. 6 (November/December 1994), p. 45.

This article is also published as chapter 12 in Ike Skelton, *Whispers of Warriors: Essays on the New Joint Era* (Washington: National Defense University Press, 2004), pp. 131-37.